

Another way to fall

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Summary: Barriss Offee had many reasons to act as she did. Or none. Or just one.

Another way to fall

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****Spoiler****: For all seasons of Star Wars: The Clone Wars, specifically the s5 finale, The Wrong Jedi, and the Prequels.

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><p>I.<p>

The first time Barriss Offee encounters Ahsoka Tano, she feels deep pity in her heart. How could she not? She has just heard Luminara sigh "at it again, are they?" , and watched Anakin Skywalker, surely the most unqualified person to teach a student in the history of the Jedi Order, behave in a completely undignified manner with his Padawan. Not only does he argue with her; they bicker. If Barriss own' Master, the elegant, serene Luminara Unduli, ever behaved like that with her, let alone in front of others, Barriss would surely die in shame and embarrassment.

So she greets poor Ahsoka with the deepest compassion and respect, to restore some sense of self worth to her. Ahsoka looks more disgruntled than anything else. Ahsoka, Barriss comes to learn, never quite reacts like you'd expect her to.

Barriss had known Anakin Skywalker before, though not very well. She is three years younger than he is, which makes her two years older than Ahsoka. When Master Luminara had learned that Skywalker had been assigned an apprentice she had exclaimed in disbelief: "They gave him

a Padawan? He should still be a Padawan!" before resorting to her usual discretion when it came to observations that could be taken as critical of the Council in front of Barriss. Who entirely agrees. Yes, Skywalker is a skilled fighter, but that is true of any number of Padawans, including Barriss herself, and she would not dream of demanding knighthood yet, let alone consider herself qualified to teach. A Jedi Knight should be as Luminara Unduli is, full of wisdom and grace, and Skywalker lacks these qualities. He doesn't look as if he'd gain them in the near future, either, not the way he feels in the Force, like a dizzying whirlwind of emotions held together just barely. Yes, Ahsoka is to be deeply pitied, and Barriss plans to spend much time with her so Ahsoka can at least indirectly benefit from Luminara's teachings, from a true Jedi Master's behavior.

Except that on their first mission together, Ahsoka not only turns out to be Barriss' match in agility and fighting skills, but displays resourcefulness in a way that directly conflicts with one of Luminara's core lessons. When Barriss realises she and Ahsoka are trapped in a tank, buried under tons of rock, and likely to suffocate before they starve, she does what she has been taught: she focuses on the fact they have accomplished their mission and thus managed to save many lives, and prepares to face death with dignity. Ahsoka, on the other hand, focuses on no such thing but rigs a power cell and her communicator with some mechanical knowledge imparted by Skywalker, and thus manages to contact their Masters, to ensure they are found beneath the rubble in time to survive.

Barriss is stunned. Deeply grateful, but stunned. Their lungs are still blessedly filling with the hot, unfiltered air of Geonosis when she hears Master Luminara say in what appears to have been an ongoing argument: "It is not that I have given up on them, Skywalker, but that when the time comes, I am prepared to let my student go. Can you say the same?"

He doesn't reply. Instead, he pulls Ahsoka upwards, to him, and the way he looks at her is so nakedly emotional that it has attachment written all over his face. Barriss hurries to give credit where due and tells her Master and Skywalker that it was Ahsoka who saved them. Luminara smiles at Barriss and says "You did well, Padawan". They do not touch. Praise by her Master, the person she venerates most in the world, usually fills Barriss with happiness, so she can't quite understand why this isn't the case today. She should be happy. She is happy, happy to be alive, happy to have found a new friend in her fellow Padawan, happy to have been of service to the greater good.

She and Ahsoka are sent off to a medical check up on board the Resolute after all the lack of oxygen and the dehydration while their Masters proceed with the next step of the ground invasion. When they rejoin them, they bring field rations, and Barriss can't believe her eyes as Ahsoka and Anakin Skywalker start to bicker again and get into what the Younglings at the Temple would call a food fight. Barriss turns to Luminara, who is busy conversing with Obi-Wan and ignores the squabbling in front of them.

Poor Ahsoka, Barriss thinks determinedly, and decides that if her eyes sting a bit, it is with pity, still.

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><p>II.<p>

Having a parasite in her that moves her like a puppet is the worst experience of Barriss' life so far and would have been even if the parasite wasn't using her to fight Ahsoka. It is an utter violation, and when the cold starts to affect the thing inside her enough for Barriss to briefly regain control of her voice, she means it when she begs Ahsoka to kill her.

Ahsoka doesn't do so. Later, Barriss learns that Ahsoka knew the cold would kill the parasites that had infected everyone else on board, but at the time she feels deeply betrayed and horrified at Ahsoka. This isn't just about being put out of her own misery, this is Ahsoka risking everyone's lives if the parasites reach the station and spread.

Ahsoka knows she acted wrongly, too. Of course she does. She had learned the same lessons Barriss did at the Temple before they became apprentices: the common good must come before any individual attachment. When Barriss awakens in the medical station, she only spends a few moments in mindnumbing relief that the thing inside her is gone, that her mind and body are her own again, before becoming aware that she's not alone, that Ahsoka is in the same room and talking to Skywalker, asking him, deeply troubled, as she should be, whether she did the right thing. In his reply, Skywalker manages to miss the point entirely and goes on about how Barriss didn't know there was a way for the crew and herself to survive and the parasites to die.

He truly isn't fit to teach. Barriss remains still, desperately trying to calm herself inwardly as well when everything inside her screams. She has trusted Ahsoka, and Ahsoka was taking a gamble. Was willing to risk bringing this horror to others. Was willing to risk Barriss continuing as a slave in her own body rather than respect Barriss' wish and choice to die for the common good, as a Jedi should.

And yet, and yet, there had been something insidiously comforting about the way Ahsoka had held her while the cold was creeping inside their limbs. Ahsoka cares for her, however misguidedly. Barriss can't bring herself to yell at her, to confront her with her betrayal. Instead, she pretends to awake slowly once Skywalker has left the room, endures Ahsoka's joyful exclamations, and then decides to find calm and peace by doing what she does best: work as a healer.

Ahsoka and Barriss aside, there is no lack of patients on board both the station and the Resolute which has come to pick them up. Barriss is efficient with a light saber, but it gives her no joy to fight; when she is envisioning her life as a Jedi Knight, she has always seen herself at focusing on medical research and practice, of working on less advanced planets in need of healers who don't demand recompense. Given they are now at war, it doesn't look like if she'd be able to practice as something other than a field medic any time soon, and often not even that because the army needs fighting Jedi. But right now, she can help the stations' medics, and it does make her feel better. In control of herself again, and focused on the greater good. Barriss believes she has expelled the dangerous emotion of rage from herself when she comes across the Resolute medical

records while checking whether anyone on board could have been infected by a parasite as well.

It seems nobody has. But their most important prisoner, the Geonosian viceroy Poggle, has needed medical attention after being interrogated by Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker.

It seems the days' horrors aren't over. When Barriss does some more research, she discovers that Skywalker had dismissed the guards before said interrogation. That this was how he'd found out the way to kill the parasites without killing the hosts, the information he then transmitted to Ahsoka. Earlier, when all the other Jedi had interrogated Poggle, he'd resisted even intense mind pressure. After the encounter with Skywalker, without any other witnesses, he'd not only provided all the information Skywalker wanted but needed to be patched up by a medical droid.

The conclusion is so obvious that Barriss doesn't understand why Skywalker still walks around, free. Her first impulse, as ever, is to report to her Master. She looks for Luminara, and only now does it occur to her to wonder why Luminara wasn't at her side when she woke up, the way Skywalker had been with Ahsoka.

Luminara Unduli, Barris is told by the ship's computer, has left the Resolute when it broke off its flight to Coruscant in order to get to the station, has proceeded on a separate vessel with the prisoner Poggle to Coruscant, so he could be debriefed by the Jedi Council.

Master Luminara is the most observant person Barriss knows. In their past, there never was anything Barriss realised that Luminara hasn't known about or realised first. Barriss can't imagine that Luminara, of all the people, has overlooked the blindingly obvious.
>But maybe Luminara hadn't wanted to know. The thought, treacherous and vile, creeps up on Barriss and spreads as the cold on board the vessel had done once Ahsoka broke the cooling system. Luminara, Kenobi, Master Mundi, they'd all been on the ship when Skywalker did whatever he's done. There's no way they wouldn't have felt it in the Force, especially Kenobi, who used to be Skywalker's Master. And yet they have done nothing about it. Because it was war, because they'd needed the information.

Barriss feels betrayed all over again. By comparison, Ahsoka letting her down feels downright minor. Ahsoka is still a Padawan. But these are all Jedi Knights, Jedi Masters, even, except for Skywalker, and if Barriss is right, they have collectively ignored one of the most sacred principles of the Jedi Order for the sake of convenience. This is corruption.

But it can't be. Luminara is good. Luminara is wise. The Jedi are good. If this is not true, then Barriss' entire life has been wrong. Somewhere in her thoughts, she must have made a terrible mistake.

So Barriss keeps silent about this, too, and by the time she's with her Master again, she has successfully managed to put it aside and focus on other things.

But a thought, once had, can not be unthought. It remains with her, and as the war continues, it festers.

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><p>III.<p>

The war continues, and there is so much death around Barriss that she sometimes feels she's drowning in it. One of the best things about being friend with Ahsoka is that Ahsoka is prone to burst back into her life on just such moments and provide light by being her unruly, only slightly more mature self. No, this is unjust: Ahsoka has matured. She even has doubts about the war and the Order herself, which is another good thing about being friends with Ahsoka: it prevents Barriss from feeling utterly alone in this regard.

One of the worst things about being friends with Ahsoka is that her doubts are not Barriss' doubts.

Ahsoka, having met some civilian Separatists like Mina Bonteri and her son, no longer sees them as a unified evil whole. She now wonders why there aren't more efforts to find a peaceful solution, maybe by using the leaders of neutral systems like the Duchess of Mandalore as intermediaries, and why no one tries to organize a coup against Dooku from within the Separatist camp. But she doesn't doubt the Jedi should continue to fight the war as such. "We can't stop as long as Dooku is in charge," Ahsoka says vehemently. "He's an evil traitor and a Sith. And the Jedi must always fight the Sith."

"Yes, but..." Barriss begins.

"He tortures people," Ahsoka says. "Him and Griveous. They occupy planets and turn the population into slaves. You can't make peace with someone like that. He enjoys death too much."

"You enjoy fighting," Barriss says, letting go of caution for once. "And your Master enjoys it, too. You've told me he wouldn't be good at peace, Ahsoka."

"I didn't mean it like that! Look, he's - yes, he enjoys fighting. And flying. And building machines. And driving Master Obi-Wan crazy, and mooning over... never mind. My point is, he doesn't do things half heartedly, and yes, he enjoys them, but fighting isn't something that defines him. Or something he does for its own sake. He does it to help people! And I do, too. Should I feel bad because I'm good at it?"

I do, Barriss wants to say. She's a fine duelist, and she can calculate strategies and explosions just as well as Ahsoka can, but she is aware that being a warrior, being a soldier, isn't something a Jedi should excel at, let alone be praised for. The way Anakin Skywalker gets praised for it by the news on the Holonet is downright revolting.

Once, the Jedi were praised for being everything Skywalker is not.

Then there are the Clones. Ahsoka is outraged when news about what Prong Krell did on Umbara reaches her, so outraged she doesn't make any attempt to disguise it and breaks off the lesson she gives to the Younglings in favor of tracking down Barriss, who is studying in the Library, and venting at her.

"How could someone like that even stay a General for longer than a single battle? How could they give our men to him? The Council should have realised about Krell a long time ago! And now so many good men are dead, and Rex has to go through an investigation, and it's..."

Barriss listens and nods and lets Ahsoka exhaust herself, and thinks Ahsoka is again missing the point. Yes, it's appalling a Jedi like Prong Krell should have deliberately led his army to slaughter. But the army itself is something that, Barriss has come to conclude, should never have existed in the first place.

She feels sorry for the Clones. She truly does. Being created to fight and die without having any choice about it whatsoever is a terrible fate. But it also makes creating them an obscenity, and it makes them into one. Barriss doesn't understand how a Jedi Master like Sifo-Dyas could have ordered the first batch of Clones, but then, she hasn't known him, and he was one single man. By now, she's not even sure how many of the original Clones who fought the first battle of Geonosis are still alive. All the current Clones were ordered into existence by the entire Jedi Council. They are sentient beings made solely to maintain a war, and it is perverse that no one seems to see how wrong this is.

These days, Barriss avoids interacting with Clones if she can, avoids even looking at them. They make her sick. Ahsoka, on the other hand, once admitted to her she feels more comfortable with them than she does in the Temple at times. "I know Anakin does," she had added offhandedly.

He would, Barriss thinks. Skywalker isn't all that is wrong with the Jedi Order, but he is the most glaring symptom. When Barriss tries to remember the Order as it should be, tries to remember peace and wisdom and serenity, she inevitably goes back in her mind to the time not solely before the Clone war started, but before Anakin Skywalker ever came to join the Order. That, surely, was the beginning of it: when they started to make exceptions from rules that have existed for a millennium for good reason. When they made their exception for him and took him in. And he has spread the cancer of wrongness ever since.

She should really make an effort to save Ahsoka from him.

"Ahsoka, I know a Padawan needs to respect their Master, but don't you sometimes wonder whether Masters can't be flawed?"

Ahsoka isn't offended or even taken aback. Instead, she laughs.

"No, I don't wonder, because I know mine is. He can be such a big headed idiot. And he's a terrible loser - do you know he cheats at sabbacc when we play?"

Before Barriss can get distracted by the idea of Jedi playing a vulgar card game favored among pirates and smugglers, Ahsoka continues, sounding unbearably fond: "But you could offer me Master Yoda himself, and I wouldn't want to switch. Not for the whole galaxy."

Barriss doesn't know what shows in her face, but something must, because Ahsoka, looking at her, grows serious. "Why? Don't you feel

that way about your Master as well?"

Luminara Undili continues to be the person Barriss looks up to most. In vain, she tries to imagine critisizing her even in jest, as Ahsoka has just done with Skywalker. The idea of calling Luminara "big headed" , let alone anything else, feels like smearing the beautiful, flawless sculptures in the Temple with dirt. Begging Luminara to be excused from field service, telling her all the death around them is too much for Barriss is equally unthinkable, because she wants Luminara to be proud of her, she needs Luminara to be proud. Talking to Luminara about how wrong almost everything about the Order is starting to feel to Barriss is the most unthinkable thing at all. Would this not imply she accuses Luminara of being just as wrong?

"Yes," Barriss replies with numb lips, "yes, of course. Not for the whole galaxy."

Something in her begins to think that the only way you can deal with a cancer is to tear it out entirely.

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><p>IV.<p>

The plan, the original plan, hadn't been to frame Ahsoka. Of course, Ahsoka is corrupted, too, just like the rest of the Order, but Barriss has enough affection left for her to hope that the shock of what she plans to do will make her see, make her repent, will cleanse her of the corruption.

At least, that has been the original plan.

What Barriss has intended to do was this: show everyone what the Jedi had become, including the Jedi themselves. Force them to acknowledge it. And the perfect way to do this was to make the culprit the most prominent hero of their obscene war, the one who infected the Order with his perversion. They'd been looking aside and ignored when Skywalker had committed crimes against the Code for years. It would be a fitting irony if he were to be exposed as what he is, what they all now are, by something he hasn't actually done.

First, when Anakin Skywalker is charged with investigating the attack, all goes as planned. That Ahsoka keeps confiding into Barriss about the steps of the investigation enables her to steer it in the right direction. But then it's Ahsoka, not Skywalker, who interrogates the sacrifice Barriss has to make and who accordingly is framed as her killer.

It shocks Barriss. She's not so hardened and resolved that it doesn't. It shocks her even more when Tarkin pushes for a military trial. No Jedi is subject to civilian or military jurisdiction, that was what Barriss had been counting on, in fact. She wanted the Order to put their Chosen One on trial, to put themselves on trial through him. The idea that the Republic government would ask for Ahsoka's expulsion from the Order so Ahsoka could be put in front of a military tribunal, and that the Order would actually comply with it: this is something so new and bizarre that it had never occurred to Barriss while she was planning everything.

Bitterly, she tells herself that they probably wouldn't have done it if it had been Skywalker Barriss had managed to frame. The Chancellor favours him, it's widely known. He'd never have asked for Skywalker's expulsion.

When she arranges for Ahsoka's escape from prison, Barriss is still not sure why she does it. Whether she wants to save her friend, or whether she wants Ahsoka to be even more surely condemned if she gets recaptured. In her heart, she wants both. She wants Ahsoka to escape and be free. And it's not a little gratifying that Ahsoka at last has stopped to trust blindly in Anakin Skywalker, that she contacts Barriss instead when she's on the run, trusts her over him.

But by now, they talk about a death sentence for the Jedi culprit. And Barriss, who once had been ready to give her life for the greater good, realises she does not want to die. Not now, not when her hands are bloody, not when she knows she won't join the Force and be at peace again. If she succeeds, if she can make the Order face its corruption, tear out its corruption, end the war, renew itself, maybe then she can die, justified. But not now.

So it has to be Ahsoka who goes to trial in her place. No, in Anakin Skywalker's place. Because this continues to be all his fault. If Ahsoka hadn't been his Padawan, Ahsoka would never have been in danger in the first place. Or if he hadn't ruined her with his corrupt, un Jedi-like ways. This still can serve as Skywalker's punishment. Because he'll lose her, he'll lose Ahsoka, one way or the other, he'll lose her. Barriss remembers the incredible joy on his face when he pulled Ahsoka out of the rubble, and knows this is just.

There is no joy on his face when he comes into Barriss' room in the Temple, when he tricks her to go for Ventress' lightsabers. Instead, he is anger and hate, a black whirlwind focusing on her. This is whom she has known him to be for years, and at last, she's managed to expose him. Maybe if she drives him to kill her in front of everyone, she'll have done enough to show the rest of the world the truth about him as well, if not about the Order. So Barriss rallies, and gives him a fight, as public as possible.

Only he doesn't kill her at the end. He wants to, she can feel it. Failing that, he wants to cause her pain. But he doesn't do that, either. He's too determined to save Ahsoka, that's where his focus is, and it eats at her all the way to the Tribunal. She's been right about him, she's been right all this time, he feels as dark next to her as Ventress did when Barriss managed to get the jump on her. And Ventress is a Sith Apprentice.

But he also keeps the darkness in check because of Ahsoka, and if he can do that, it goes against everything Barriss has been taught about the Dark Side. Against her will, she wonders whether Luminara will fight to prove her innocence, the way Anakin has done for Ahsoka. Yes, Barriss is guilty, but Skywalker couldn't have known Ahsoka wasn't. Could have guessed, but not known. Everyone else certainly has accepted at least the possibility of Ahsoka's guilt in the face of all the evidence. Even Master Plo Koon, who had found Ahsoka as a toddler, who had brought her to the Order. The entire Council. Whether or not they believed her to be guilty in their hearts, they had given her up to the military to maintain the Order's reputation. Because the greater good must always come first.

No, Master Luminara won't fight for her. Barriss knows this as surely as she knows the sun will rise and fall, and the knowledge tastes as bitter in her heart as it ever did.

She gets her chance to confront them all with what the Order has become at last when Skywalker drags her in front of the court. It is not how Barriss had imagined it, but there it is, and the words erupt from her like water from a too long neglected dam. Dimly, she is aware of Ahsoka's stunned face and the deep hurt in her eyes, but Barriss knows, better than anyone, that you have to get past such hurt to appreciate it for the necessity it was. She hasn't betrayed her friend. She has given her, and everyone else, the harshest yet most necessary gift of all: the truth about themselves.

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><p>V.<p>

Barriss Offee doesn't get a death sentence. Not for lack of trying on the military's part; Tarkin is indifferent to which Jedi pays for the death of his men, as long as it's a Jedi. But surprisingly, the Chancellor intervenes and commutes her sentence. The reason is unknown to Barriss at the time; she has never met Chancellor Palpatine, has only seen him from a distance, and she very much doubts anyone in the Order, least of all Palpatine's favourite Jedi, has used their influence to plead on her behalf.

She doesn't find out the reason until almost a year later. When the Republic falls and the Empire is created, Barriss feels the backlash of Order 66, of all the dying Jedi, and it drives her almost insane in her prison cell.

Master Luminara doesn't call for her when she dies. That hurts almost as badly as the death itself, which Barriss can feel across the galaxy through their tattered bond.

By the time Barriss is brought before the Emperor, it could be weeks later, or maybe months, she doesn't know. She has just started to collect herself. For all that she has come to hate the Order - yes, hate, that forbidden feeling, she can now acknowledge it -, it has been everything she has ever known. She has never wanted all of them to die, not even when killing some of them. She only wanted them to admit how wrong they were, and become again what they should never stopped being.

The Emperor is a Sith, she can sense it at once when she's brought into his presence, as she never could when he was still the Chancellor. A maelstrom of emptiness, more frightening than anything she has ever encountered. And he's not alone. There is someone else with him. Someone whose presence in the Force feels familiar. Warped, but familiar.

There is nothing familiar about either of their forms, not about the Emperor's hooded appearance and skull-like face, so unlike Chancellor Palpatine's grandfatherly countenance and tasteful Naboo elegance, not about the dark figure next to him, more droid than anything else, with its breathing, regulated by a machine, the only thing giving away that this is someone with a lung.

"Ah, there she is," the Emperor says. "Barriss Offee. Never let it be said I am not generous to my faithful servant, Lord Vader. She's yours, at your disposal, to do with as you please. Kill her, or make her into someone useful to your Emperor, I don't care. But what will it be?"

There is something eager and expectant in his voice. This is a test, and not for her. This, Barriss understands, is why her life has been spared. For this moment, which the Emperor must have known would come. It had never been about her, but about him. This man, the ruin of them all.

The mask turns in her direction. She can sense his focus, as she could once before, and now she's sure that her guess is right. She knows who he is. Despite the voice, which is as strange and new as his appearance.

"Whatever you wish, Master. She has no meaning to me now."

"She had to Anakin Skywalker," the Emperor says, slowly.

"Anakin Skywalker is gone," the masked figure replies. There is no sense that he's lying. He doesn't feel empty, the way the Emperor does. There is fear, anger and hate in him, hate powerful enough to make it hard to discern anything else for people less trained than Barriss is, and suffering; but none of it directed at Barriss. He truly seems to be indifferent as to whether she lives or dies, and this is so unlike their last encounter that she almost doubts what he and the Emperor have just confirmed about his identity.

The Emperor regards her a while longer, either waiting for Vader to change his mind or for her to plead for her life. Neither of them obliges. This has nothing to do with courage on Barriss' part. She simply feels too frozen in his presence to know whether she wants to live or die.

"Take her with you," the Emperor says at last. "Instruct her on how she can redeem herself by serving the Empire, if her death has no longer meaning for you. We'll see whether she does."

The guards who have brought Barriss in the new throne room take the Force inhibitors used to cuff her from her, and step aside. Vader nods curtly, and leaves the room. She finds herself stumbling after him, almost as if her body moves of its own volition.

>They are outside the Imperial Palace when he finally addresses her.<p>

"Go," he says.

This far from the Emperor, she finds she can speak again. "Are you sparing my life?" she asks in disbelief. "Is this a trick? Didn't your Master just tell you to make me into some kind of Sith Apprentice?"

Now he does feel something about her, something familiar. It is almost reassuring to have his anger directed at her again.

"I am not sparing you, Barriss Offee," he says. "I kill Jedi. You are none."

Her access to the Force is back, and stronger than it ever was, because she has never been filled with so much hate as she is right now. The idea that he judges her, he of all the people, is so infuriating that she instinctively grabs for a light saber which is no longer there, then tries to choke him with the Force, as she has done that poor woman who had been her dupe, one of the few deaths she feels she did deserve judgment for.

He deflects her attack with humiliating ease, but doesn't attack her himself. He simply holds her still.

"There are worse things than death," he says. "Skywalker didn't know this. But I do. You get what he did, Padawan. You get to live."

Again, he turns his back on her. This time, she doesn't follow him as he turns away. Instead, she remains where he has left her, a tiny figure in the new Empire that has been created around them. For a moment, she wants to yell after him, like the child she has never been. Wants to ask him what became of Ahsoka, whose death she has not sensed on the day so many died, or in the bloody days since. Wants to force him to stand and fight her, to kill her like the others; wants to beg him to teach her how to live with herself, knowing what she did. For surely, if anyone understands this, it must be him.

But there has only been one apprentice for him, and it would never be her.

End
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